

# A Clipper visit with Katherine Pillsbury

By Mary Schiess  
Clipper Contributor

As part of its 1936 tercentenary celebration, Duxbury Town Meeting created the position of town historian, a person who would study and document the history of the town. The town historian had and has a single formal responsibility. She or he must review and approve new street names. The street names should be appropriate to the town and not sound so similar that the police or fire department might confuse them. The first town historian was Reuben Peterson who held the position from 1937-1942. The second was Walter Hunt from 1942-1955. Then came Dorothy Wentworth, Katherine Pillsbury, and now, Tony Kelso. Of course, no lover of history could so limit the role to reviewing street names. At a recent interview, Katherine Pillsbury distinguishes between a job and a professional commitment. She notes that being town historian is so much more than a job.



After sharing an hour of stories and experiences, Katherine relaxes in an environment that she cherishes.

Photos by Mary Schiess

One might assume that the historian would require a long lineage of Duxbury ancestry. This was not the case for Katherine Pillsbury. After living in Princeton, New Jersey, Katherine followed her mother to Bryn Mawr. At the age of 12, Katherine's mother promised that she could



Carolyn Ravenscroft receives a gift of books  
From Katherine

spend her junior year studying abroad. In Geneva, Switzerland, Katherine studied European history and worked for the League of Nations. Her interest in history expanded and matured during a year that Katherine describes as "life changing."

Katherine's marriage to Samuel Pillsbury brought her to Duxbury. She notes, "It just happened; the time was right." Dorothy Wentworth was moving on, and Katherine was arriving. Her love of history dating to her Bryn Mawr college days would be essential. Her library experience at the Noble and Greenough School provided the meticulous

organizational and research sense for the role. She observes, "I was delighted to have a name for what would be my main interest for the next 25 years."

I visited with Katherine at the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society Archives. Her sense of humor, perhaps a hidden qualification for the historian, was evident. She described herself as a "place holder" between Dorothy Wentworth and Tony Kelso. She says, "I feel I was an interim between Dorothy Wentworth and Tony Kelso." When I introduced her as town historian emerita

to a high school intern at the DRHS Archives, Katherine impishly noted, "I forgot to wear my crown."

When Dorothy Wentworth left, she offered a list of topics that her successors might research. The topics lead to what Katherine calls her "Magnum Opus," also known as the "Duxbury Book." With Katherine in charge, interested residents met and chose a topic. She shared that some conducted excellent research and produced well-written articles. Others lost interest and drifted away. When Bob Hale joined the committee, he, a prolific writer and lover of books, assumed charge of the authors. Jack Post offered financial expertise. Katherine "pulled it all together" and coordinated illustrations. An experienced book designer emerged, and Catherine Boynton's connection with D.C. Heath opened further access to the publishing world. In 1987, the book was published.

Katherine's affection for the town is obvious. She loves ships. She loves sailing. She says, "Duxbury is special. It is beautiful." Does she have concerns or worries about Duxbury? She feels the town is growing too fast. The loss of history, the old houses, saddens her. "The beach and the bay define Duxbury," she notes. "We need to protect our inheritance." Katherine's main concern is water. When pressed to elaborate, she says, "No, just water." The ramifications of this concern affect every aspect of this town.

And how would Katherine like people to think of her time as town historian? "That I cared," she said.



**Katherine Pillsbury arrives at DRHS world. Archives with a major life accomplishment, The Duxbury Book, 1637-1987.**